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NEA FOR FRONT OFFICE. NSC FOR ABRAMS/SINGH/PASCUAL

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SUBJECT: UNEASY STATUS QUO AT HEBRON'S IBRAHIMI MOSQUE/TOMB  
OF THE PATRIARCHS

Classified By: Consul General Jake Walles, per reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) Summary. PolCouns visited Hebron's Ibrahimi Mosque/Tomb of the Patriarchs in late August. Visitors to the building must pass through metal detectors, and armed Israeli border police patrol inside and out at all times. Metal security gates separate Muslims and Jews, who worship on different sides of the structure. The Palestinian Authority-designated director of the mosque said Israeli modifications to the building and the border police have inhibited both Muslim worship and the PA's efforts to conduct repairs. End Summary.

#### SECURITY DESIGNED TO SEPARATE WORSHIPPERS

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¶2. (SBU) PolCouns visited Hebron's Ibrahimi Mosque/Tomb of the Patriarchs August 20. The structure, which is a holy site for both Muslims and Jews, is currently divided into a mosque and a synagogue. Separate Muslim and Jewish entrances to the structure are protected by solid metal security gates, and all visitors must pass through metal detectors before entering. Muslims and Jews arrive at the building via separate streets.

¶3. (SBU) Inside the structure, the Muslim and Jewish worship areas are separated by solid metal gates that were installed after the 1994 attack, in which a Jewish settler killed 29 Muslim worshippers. The Muslim area contains the cenotaphs of biblical Isaac and Rebecca, while the Jewish side contains the cenotaphs of Jacob and Leah. Windows from both sides look into small rooms containing the cenotaphs of Abraham and Sarah. The cenotaph of Sarah blocks the view between Muslims and Jews, but Muslims and Jews can see each other across the room containing Abraham's cenotaph via windows, where there is a pane of bullet-proof glass. (Note: The remains of the biblical figures revered by both religions are said to be located in caves below the structure. End note.)

¶4. (C) Zaid al-Ja'abari, the PA Ministry of Awqaf's Director of the mosque, said the structure is turned over to Jewish worshippers ten days a year for their exclusive use during Jewish holidays and to Muslim worshippers ten days a year during Muslim holidays. He told PolCouns that modifications made to the Jewish side of the structure have caused the Muslim side of the structure to be less suitable for worship. He said the metal security gates prevent the flow of air through the structure, and an awning erected over the courtyard prevents natural light from reaching the Muslim side. Muslims complain that the mosque becomes too warm during prayer times, he said.

#### ISRAELI BORDER POLICE ON SITE

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¶5. (SBU) Israeli border police -- many of them Arabic-speaking Druze -- guard the site. The border police

have access to both sides of the structure and carry their weapons at all times. They walk on carpets lining the perimeter of the Muslim worship area to avoid offending worshippers and move freely around the Jewish worship area. The police can move between the two sides through small doors in the security gates. PolCouns observed roughly a dozen Muslim and Jewish worshippers each praying in their respective areas.

#### DISPUTED RENOVATIONS TO JACOB'S TOMB

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¶16. (C) Al-Ja'abari said the Awqaf Ministry began to clean and repair the area around Jacob and Leah's cenotaphs on the Jewish side on August 10 after lengthy negotiations with the Israeli Civil Administration. He said Jewish worshippers initially harassed the Palestinian workers, but that the border police intervened. Al-Ja'abari told PolOff the border police on August 26 ordered the Awqaf to stop working from August 27 to October 31 to allow Jews to worship during the high holidays. He said the border police told him settlers from nearby Kiryat Arba would complete the work.

¶17. (C) Deputy Minister of Awqaf Salah Zuhayka asserted to PolOff August 26 that the entire building is under the administration of the Awqaf and that Israelis have no right to conduct repairs or make changes to the structure. He said Israeli actions could inflame Muslim anxiety at this very sensitive site.

WALLES